

University of Groningen

Review of: Luba Freedman, Classical Myths in Italian Renaissance Painting. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011

de Jong, Jan

Published in:
Renaissance Quarterly

DOI:
[10.1086/667278](https://doi.org/10.1086/667278)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2012

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

de Jong, J. (2012). Review of: Luba Freedman, Classical Myths in Italian Renaissance Painting. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. *Renaissance Quarterly*, 65(2), 519 - 521.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/667278>

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Luba Freedman. *Classical Myths in Italian Renaissance Painting*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xvi + 292 pp. \$95. ISBN: 978-1-107-00119-0.

The central argument of this study is that “the pictorial depiction of classical myths in the *all’antica* style began at the end of the quattrocento and flourished in the cinquecento” (14). This means that “For the first time in the history of postclassical art, mythological narratives were represented as belonging to a specific cultural setting, one with its own particular mode of expression” (125). According to the author, this constituted a “revolutionary approach to the classical heritage” (8).

In pursuing this argument, Freedman focuses on artistic interpretations of mythological narratives and does not propose “far-reaching conclusions as to the real desires and intentions behind the commissioning of *all’antica* paintings of classical myths” (8–9). In addition, she tries to stay within strict limits. Thus, she concentrates on (representations of) selected mythological narratives (4) within the time limits of 1482 and 1550 (11). It is questionable, however, if Renaissance artists and their patrons would have made similar strict distinctions between “selected

mythological narratives” and “just mythological imagery” (4), and one may wonder, therefore, how useful they are. In the case of the time limits, however, the author is flexible and does not always firmly respect them. Thus, we find a discussion of Titian’s *poesie* for Philip II, from 1553 and later, elucidated by observations from Giorgio Vasari’s *Lives* from 1568. The time limit of 1482, on the other hand, may have made the author miss the series of Hercules scenes in Palazzo Venezia, Rome, from ca. 1467–71.

Perhaps this Hercules series has not really been overlooked but deliberately ignored, as Freedman does not consider its style (sufficiently) *all’antica*. For the same reason, she spends only a few words on the Cupid and Psyche murals in the Villa Belriguardo (Voghiera near Ferrara), from 1493. Even though these frescoes have been lost for centuries, Freedman appears to know that they were not painted *all’antica* (240, n. 26). This makes it seem as if *all’antica* is a clear and undisputable criterion, but her definition “in the style of the ancients” (2) leaves plenty of room for debate. Consequently, her selection of works that (supposedly) have been painted *all’antica* looks rather subjective, just as the ensuing, bombastically presented claim that Raphael’s *Galatea* and Sebastiano’s *Polyphemus* in the Villa Farnesina, Rome, from around 1514, are “the earliest Renaissance murals to depict a familiar tale *all’antica*” (81).

Just as essential as the definition of *all’antica*, is the characterization of mythology versus history. In chapter 7, Freedman studies the terms used in the Renaissance: *fabula* or *favola*, *poesia* and (*hi*)*storia*, concluding that the former were used “to refer to the contents of paintings on mythological subjects,” and that by the time of Vasari, “the paintings themselves were referred to as *poesie*.” (201) Although the author obviously includes Vasari’s writings from 1568, she ignores Gilio da Fabriano’s *Dialogo degli errori della pittura* from 1564. This treatise holds an important discussion on a painter as *storico* and/or *poeta*, from which it appears that (*hi*)*storia* deals with facts and that, therefore, a history painter should render the truth. *Poesia*, on the other hand, is the field of imagination, where poets enjoy freedom to deal creatively with the truth. Accordingly, painters have the license (and were perhaps even expected) not to stick closely to the texts they illustrate, but re-create them imaginatively in visual terms. This means, once more, that the author’s restriction to “selected mythological narratives” painted in a style *all’antica* leads to a vision that twists the viewpoint from which the images were originally meant to be seen.

Freedman’s study contains interesting discussions on such issues as classical myths in the educational program and artists’ familiarity with them, and a useful survey of *ekphrases*. There are occasional slips, for instance the Renaissance’s familiarity with the *Cena Trimalchionis* (32). This fragment of Petronius’s work was not printed until 1664 and only very sporadically known before that date. A serious gaffe is the assertion that, “over the course of the sixteenth century, no . . . cardinal . . . ever commissioned paintings of classical myths.” (28) To the contrary, the palaces of Cardinals Ricci and Capodiferro in Rome could easily be extended with more examples.

All together, this book contains interesting material, which should be read, however, carefully. The same is true for the central argument. Its starting points are questionable and many observations flowing from them are certainly open to discussion.

JAN L. DE JONG
University of Groningen